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IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

October Term, 1968

No. 267

NEBRO JOHNSON,

Petitioner,

vs.

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK,

Respondent,

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE APPELLATE TERM OF THE SUPREME COURT OF NEW YORK, FIRST JUDICIAL DEPARTMENT

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INDEX

	PAGE
PETITION	1–5
EXHIBIT A.—Affirmance by Appellate Term of the Supreme Court of New York, First Judicial Department	6
EXHIBIT B.—Certificate Denying Leave to Appeal by Court of Appeals of the State of New York	6

Cases Cited

Cantwell v. Connecticut, 310 U. S. 296	5
Champlin Ref. Co., 274 U. S. 445	5
Connally v. General Constr. Co., 269 U. S. 385	5
People v. Cherry, 307 N. Y. 308	5
People v. O'Connor, 257 N. Y. 473, 178 N. E. 762	5
Winters v. People of the State of New York, 333 U. S. 507, 92 L. Ed. 840	5

Statutes Cited

Constitution of the United States:	
Article IV	3
Article XIV	2
Penal Law:	
Section 244	3
Section 722	3, 4
Section 1851	3

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1. (A) Judgment of conviction after trial of the crimes of Disorderly Conduct (Penal Law, Sec. 722(c), Assault in the third degree (Penal Law, Sec. 244), and Resisting Arrest (Penal Law, Sec. 1851), was unanimously affirmed without opinion by the Appellate Term of the Supreme Court of New York, First Judicial Department. The judgment was reported in the New York Law Journal on the 17th day of January, 1968. The reported decision was numbered 700. A copy of the report appearing in the Law Journal is appended hereto and marked Exhibit "A".

On the 21st day of March, 1968 Honorable John F. Scileppi, Associate Judge of the Court of Appeals of the State of New York, certified that upon application timely made by appellant for a certificate pursuant to Section 520 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, no question of law was presented which ought to be reviewed by the Court of Appeals, and permission to appeal was thereby denied. A

copy of the Certificate denying leave is hereby appended marked Exhibit "B".

(B)(1) Defendant was convicted on the 18th day of July, 1967.

(2) No order respecting a rehearing and no order granting an extension of time within which to petition for certiorari has been granted.

(3) The Court has jurisdiction to review the judgment of conviction because the conviction is repugnant to the due process clause of the 14th amendment of the Constitution of the United States and Article IV, Section 2.(1) of the United States Constitution.

(C)(1) Does appellant's conviction of Disorderly Conduct (Penal Law, Section 722(6)) violate the due process clause and Article IV, Section 2(1) of the United States Constitution in that the State failed to prove on trial an actual breach of the peace, and Section 722(6) of the Penal. Law does not require an actual breach of the peace for a conviction?

(2) Is the language of Section 722(6) of the Penal Law of the State of New York, to wit, "with intent to provoke a breach of the peace, or whereby a breach of the peace may be occasioned," vague and ambiguous so as to fail to create a clearly defined and ascertainable standard of conduct, thereby rendering the statute unconstitutionally vague?

(3) Was appellant entitled to use such force as is necessary to resist an arrest made pursuant to an unconstitutional statute?

(D) AMENDMENT XIV (1868)

Section 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof,

are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

ARTICLE IV

Section 2. (1) The Citizens of each State shall be entitled to all Privileges and Immunities of Citizens in the several States.

Penal Law, Sec. 722. DISORDERLY CONDUCT

Any person who with intent to provoke a breach of the peace, or whereby a breach of the peace may be occasioned, commits any of the following acts shall be deemed to have committed the offense of disorderly conduct:

6. Interferes with any person in any place by jostling against such person or unnecessarily crowding him or by placing a hand in the proximity of such person's pocket, pocketbook or handbag.

Penal Law, Sec. 244. ASSAULT IN THIRD DEGREE

A person who: 1. Commits an assault, or an assault and battery, not such as is specified in sections two hundred and forty and two hundred and forty-two . . ."

Penal Law, Sec. 1851: RESISTING PUBLIC OFFICER IN THE DISCHARGE OF HIS DUTY

A person who, in any case or under any circumstances not otherwise specially provided for, wilfully resists, delays, or obstructs a public officer in dis-

charging, or attempting to discharge, a duty of his office, is guilty of a misdemeanor.

(E) The appellant was arrested by a plainclothes detective after he was allegedly observed placing his hand inside a woman's pocketbook as she was boarding a northbound train at 59th Street and Lexington Avenue. After the arrest and while appellant and the detective were ascending an escalator, appellant tried to escape. During the attempt to escape, appellant punched and bit the arresting officer. A uniformed officer intervened, and the two officers subdued appellant.

At the trial the detective admitted that when appellant placed his hand inside the lady's pocketbook, no disturbance or commotion was caused, and that no breach of the peace had taken place before the arrest.

(F) The federal questions were first raised on appeal to the Appellate Term in the appellant's brief. The appeal was dismissed without opinion.

On a motion to dismiss at the trial, appellant argued to the Trial Judge that the law of the State of New York had only applied Section 722(6) in those cases where an actual breach of the peace had occurred and that such strict construction was required in order to preserve the constitutionality of Section 722(6). The Trial Court in finding defendant guilty thereby applied this statute unconstitutionally and thereby raised the federal question at the time of conviction by applying the statute to this defendant in an unconstitutional manner.

(H) Section 722(6) purports to make conduct which is admittedly not disorderly, disorderly conduct. This, in effect, robs words of their meaning. The words of Justice Frankfurter seem applicable to the statute: "Definiteness

is designedly avoided so as to allow the net to be cast at large, to enable men to be caught who are vaguely undesirable in the eyes of police and prosecution, although not chargeable with any particular offense". *Winters* v. *People of the State of New York*, 333 U. S. 507, 92 L. Ed. 840. "No one may be required at peril of life, liberty or property to speculate as to the meaning of penal statutes. All are entitled to be informed as to what the State commands or forbids". *Champlin Ref. Co.*, 274 U. S. 445, 458. "And a statute which either forbids or requires the doing of an act in terms so vague that men of common intelligence must necessarily guess at its meaning and differ as to its application, violates the first essential of due process of law". *Connally* v. *General Constr. Co.*, 269 U. S. 385, 391.

The statute is also repugnant to due process because in order for conduct to be disorderly it must rise to a level of a breach of the peace. It must "menace public order and tranquility". *Cantwell* v. *Connecticut*, 310 U. S. 296, 308.

Resistance to arrest is not a crime if the arrest was not lawful (*People* v. *O'Connor*, 257 N. Y. 473, 178 N. E. 762), "the one limitation on its exercise (force) being that the victim may not pursue his counterattack merely for the sake of revenge or the infliction of needless injury". *People* v. *Cherry*, 307 N. Y. 308.

The People proved no intent for revenge or needless injury greater than that necessary for appellant to escape his unlawful arrest.

Respectfully submitted,

WILLIAM H. OLTARSH,
Attorney for Appellant.

To:

FRANK S. HOGAN, ESQ.,
District Attorney, New York County.

EXHIBIT A

Affirmance by Appellate Term of the Supreme Court of New York, First Judicial Department

New York Law Journal, Jan. 17th, 1968

Judgment of conviction unanimously affirmed. No opinion.

EXHIBIT B

Certificate Denying Leave to Appeal by Court of Appeals of the State of New York

STATE OF NEW YORK COURT OF APPEALS

Before:

HON. JOHN F. SCILEPPI,
Associate Judge

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK,

against

NEBRO JOHNSON

I, JOHN F. SCILEPPI, Associate Judge of the Court of Appeals of the State of New York, do hereby certify that, upon application timely made by the above named appellant for a certificate pursuant to §520 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, and upon the record and proceedings herein, there is no question of law presented which ought to be

reviewed by the Court of Appeals and permission to appeal is hereby denied.

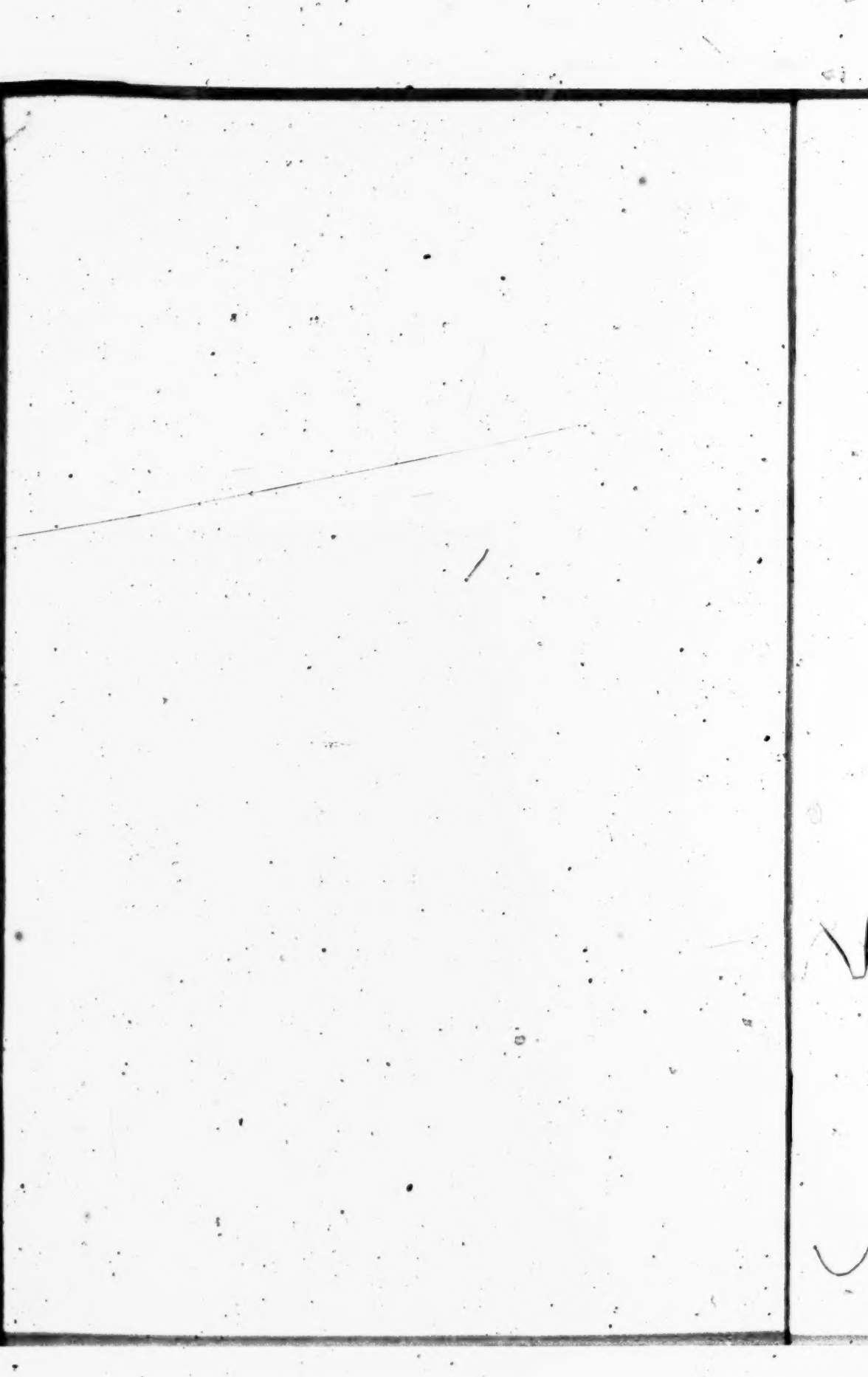
Dated at Kew Gardens, New York
March 21, 1968

JOHN F. SCILEPPI
Associate Judge

Criminal Court of the City of New York
County of NY—Date April 23 1968
I hereby certify that the within is a true
Copy of the Record on file at this Court.

MILTON (Illegible)
Court Clerk

(Seal)



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NEBRO JOHNSON,

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vs.

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK,

Respondent.

RESPONDENT'S BRIEF IN OPPOSITION TO PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
PRELIMINARY STATEMENT	1
QUESTIONS PRESENTED	2
STATUTE INVOLVED	2
STATEMENT OF THE CASE	3
POINT I—No substantial Federal question is raised by the petition, for an actual breach of peace is not required by the due process clause of the United States Constitution to support a conviction for disorderly conduct	5
POINT II—Section 722(6) of the Penal Law of New York is not unconstitutionally vague	6
POINT III—The Constitution does not forbid a prosecution for forcible resistance to an arrest under a statute later deemed unconstitutional; in any case, the issue is not before this Court	8
CONCLUSION	9

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Cases:

People v. Cherry, 307 N.Y. 308 (1954)	8
People v. Chesnick, 309 N.Y. 58 (1950)	6, 7
People v. McNeil, 21 A.D.2d 1, *aff'd* 15 N.Y.2d 717 (1965)	8, 9
People v. Monnier, 280 N.Y. 77 (1939)	5, 7

PAGE

People v. Most, 171 N.Y. 423 (1901) 7
People v. Nixon, 248 N.Y. 182 (1939) 6
People v. Pieri, 269 N.Y. 315 (1936) 5, 7

United States v. Harris, 347 U.S. 612 (1954) 7

Wainwright v. New Orleans, 88 S. Ct. 2243 (1968) 8
Winters v. New York, 333 U.S. 507 (1947) 7

Statutes:

N.Y. Penal L. §35.27 (1968) 8

N.Y. Penal L. §165.25 (1967) 3, 7

N.Y. Penal L. §722(6) (repealed 1967) 2, 3, 5, 6

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Preliminary Statement

This is a petition for a writ of certiorari to review an order of the Appellate Term of the Supreme Court of New York, First Judicial Department, rendered January 17, 1968, which affirmed a judgment of the Criminal Court of New York, rendered July 18, 1967, convicting petitioner after trial of the offense of DISORDERLY CONDUCT (jostling) [Penal law, §722(6)], and the crimes of ASSAULT IN THE THIRD DEGREE [Penal Law, §244], and RESISTING ARREST [Penal Law, §1851], and sentencing him for the latter

crimes to serve a term of six months in the Workhouse. Sentence was suspended on the disorderly conduct charge. By certificate dated March 21, 1968, leave to appeal to the Court of Appeals of the State of New York was denied by the Honorable JOHN F. SCILEPPI, Associate Judge of that Court.

Questions Presented

1. Whether an actual breach of peace is required by the due process clause of the United States Constitution to support a conviction for disorderly conduct?
2. Whether Section 722(6) (jostling) of the New York Penal Law is unconstitutionally vague?
3. Whether the Constitution forbids a prosecution for forcible resistance to an arrest based on an unconstitutional statute?
4. Whether the latter issue is properly before this Court, since it was not passed upon below?

Statute Involved

Section 722 of the N.Y. Penal Law provided, as of the dates involved in this case:*

"Disorderly conduct

"Any person who with intent to provoke a breach of the peace, or whereby a breach of the peace may

* Under the revised N.Y. Penal Law (effective September 1967), subdivision six has been removed from the disorderly conduct statute, and re-enacted as the separate crime of jostling. N.Y. Penal L. §165.25.

be occasioned, commits any of the following acts shall be deemed to have committed the offense of disorderly conduct:

* * *

"(6) Interferences with any person in any place by jostling against such person or unnecessarily crowding him or by placing a hand in the proximity of such person's pocket, pocketbook or handbag * * *."

Statement of the Case

Detective **Charles Langan**, of the Transit Authority Pickpocket Squad, testified that on February 17, 1967, he arrested the defendant after observing him surreptitiously opening and placing his hand inside a woman's pocketbook as she boarded a northbound train at 59th Street and Lexington Avenue Subway Station (12).* Prior to apprehending Johnson, the officer had also observed him standing on the platform while at least twelve trains passed, and on one occasion had seen him place his hand on the clasp of the purse of another woman commuter (9, 11).

After the officer showed Johnson his badge and said "you are under arrest for jostling," he escorted him up the escalator located in that station. Johnson, Detective Langan testified, attacked him and attempted to push him down the stairs. Langan thereupon tried to handcuff Johnson; however, petitioner bit the officer's thumb and punched and kicked him. He pushed the officer down the escalator (13). The officer chased and caught up with Johnson, grappled with him, Johnson kicked and punched him (13-14). Finally, a uniformed officer, upon hearing the commo-

* References are to record on appeal.

tion, ran over and intervened, subduing petitioner (12-14). Detective Langan further testified that he had shown Johnson his badge and told him the reason for the arrest when he had originally apprehended him (12, 23, 25).

The detective's testimony was confirmed in part by the testimony of Patrolman **Bernard Senator**, who stated that during the rush hour he heard a loud commotion, and upon approaching its source, saw two men rolling down the escalator shaft. Senator, recognizing his fellow officer, directed defendant to cease his resistance—which, however, he did not do, hitting the second officer in the chest, kicking him in the groin and knees; the officers were compelled to subdue him forcibly (31-2).

The defendant, **Nebro Johnson**, testified he had been convicted twelve years before the instant case for the identical crime (36). With respect to the case at bar, however, he asserted he had stepped off a Jerome Avenue local to allow other passengers to leave and had been unable to reboard that train (37). Thereafter, he had to wait until two other trains passed until another Jerome Avenue train arrived at the station. As he was about to board that train he was arrested by Langan for "jostling" (38). As the detective led him up the escalator, Johnson reported, "it hit my mind I didn't do nothing. I wouldn't take no arrest. I didn't do anything. I pulled against him" (39). The two men rolled down the stairs, and when defendant attempted to escape he was captured by a uniformed patrolman (39). The defendant denied the attempted theft (41) and also asserted that he had neither bitten nor hit the officers (42).

POINT I

No substantial Federal question is raised by the petition, for an actual breach of peace is not required by the due process clause of the United States Constitution to support a conviction for disorderly conduct.

Petitioner contends that the disorderly conduct statute (former N.Y. Penal Law, §722-6) has historically been applied only in those cases where an actual breach of the peace has occurred, and that such strict construction is required to preserve the constitutionality of the statute. Since no actual breach of peace occurred in the instant case (with respect to the jostling charge), he claims that he has been deprived of due process of law. His underlying premise is incorrect, however, for it is clear from both the explicit language of §722(6) of New York Penal Law, as well as from Court of Appeals cases construing that statute, that an actual breach of the peace is not required [see *People* v. *Monnier*, 280 N.Y. 77 (1939); *People* v. *Pieri*, 269 N.Y. 315 (1936)]. It is sufficient if a breach of the peace might have ensued from defendant's conduct.

> "The conduct charged must at least be such that a breach of peace has become imminent or might reasonably be expected or intended to flow from such conduct" [*People* v. *Monnier, supra* at 79].

The test established by the New York courts to determine whether "a breach of the peace may be occasioned" is whether defendant's conduct at the time, in the place and under the circumstances prevailing, led to or was reasonably likely to lead to disorder or public disturbance

[*People* v. *Chesnick,* 309 N.Y. 58 (1950); *People* v. *Nixon,* 248 N.Y. 182 (1939)]. It may not reasonably be argued that there was no evidence whatever of this element, such that the conviction deprived petitioner of due process. In the case at bar the time of the occurrence was 5:30 p.m. on a crowded subway station platform. No extensive argument is required to demonstrate the likelihood of public disorder had petitioner's attempted theft been discovered by his female victim as she boarded the train.

In any event, by any constitutional test of the breach of the peace statute as applied to jostling, the arresting officer had probable cause for an arrest, for a violation of that statute committed in his presence. Hence, even if ultimately guilt under the statute, as construed by petitioner, was not proved beyond a reasonable doubt, the arrest was valid, and petitioner had no right to assault the officer and resist the arrest. Hence, the convictions for the latter crimes are not affected by petitioner's claim as to breach of the peace conviction.

POINT II

Section 722(6) of the Penal Law of New York is not unconstitutionally vague.

Petitioner contends that "the language of the Penal Law of the State of New York, to wit, Section 722(6) 'with intent to provoke a breach of the peace, or whereby a breach of the peace may be occasioned' is vague and ambiguous, so as to fail to create a clearly defined and ascertainable standard of conduct" (brief, p. 2). The preamble to the disorderly conduct statute, however, enjoins

conduct which is either actually or potentially disruptive of the public peace. The statute thereafter sets forth in detail what specific conduct is prohibited, for instance, in the section involved in the case at bar it forbids placing one's "hand in the proximity of [another's] pocket, pocketbook or handbag." It is clear that a violation of subdivision (6) is likely to occasion a breach of the peace as that term has been defined by the New York courts, that is, "a disturbance of public order by an act of violence, or by any act likely to produce violence, or which, by causing consternation and alarm, disturbs the peace and quiet of the community" [*People* v. *Most,* 171 N.Y. 423, 429 (1901); see also, *People* v. *Pieri,* 269 N.Y. 315 (1936); *People* v. *Monnier,* 290 N.Y. 77 (1939); *People* v. *Chesnick,* 302 N.Y. 58 (1950)]. This Court is, of course, bound to observe the gloss placed on the statute by New York's highest court [*United States* v. *Harris,* 347 U.S. 612 (1954); *Winters* v. *New York,* 333 U.S. 507 (1947)], which renders the statute's meaning abundantly clear.

It may be noted that the Legislature of the State of New York has recently revised the Penal Law, modifying the disorderly conduct statute to the extent of removing therefrom the section dealing with jostling. The latter act is now a misdemeanor rather than a mere offense, and is treated as a form of theft. The element of intent to breach the peace, complained of here, has been entirely removed from the revised statute. N.Y. Penal L. §165.25.

POINT III

The Constitution does not forbid a prosecution for forcible resistance to an arrest under a statute later deemed unconstitutional; in any case, the issue is not before this Court.

Since petitioner's constitutional attack on the jostling statute is ill-founded, there is no need to dwell at length upon petitioner's contention that he had the right to use force to resist an arrest made in good faith pursuant to that statute. Whether one may resist by force an "illegal" arrest, and what degree of force is permissible, is a question recently presented to this Court, but not decided [*Wainwright* v. *New Orleans*, —— U.S. ——, 88 S. Ct. 2243 (1968)]. In New York, it was held that a person may forcibly resist an illegal arrest unless the force is unreasonable or excessive [*People* v. *Cherry*, 307 N.Y. 308 (1954)], a rule considerably limited by a later appellate decision [*People* v. *McNeil*, 21 A.D.2d 1, *aff'd* 15 N.Y.2d 717 (1965)], and, still more recently, abolished altogether by a statute forbidding any forcible resistance to arrest [see N.Y. Penal Law, §35.27 (effective March 31, 1968)]. Prosecution, as here, for violent resistance to an arrest which was undertaken by the officer in good faith is well within the police powers of the state. The common law rule relied upon by petitioner is derived from an age when private citizens made the arrests. In these times of well-equipped police officers, permitting resistance to an arrest which the officer considers part of his duty serves no function; it does not deter the arrest, but leads to violence by both the citizen and the officer. Further, petitioner's conduct of punching,

kicking and pushing the officer down an escalator, then hitting his partner and kicking him in the groin, would surpass the common law limits of "reasonable resistance" [*People* v. *McNeil, supra*].

In any event, the issue treated herein was not shown to have been passed upon by the Appellate Term. Therefore, it is not properly raised before this Court.

Conclusion

The petition for a writ of certiorari should be denied.

Respectfully submitted,

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August, 1968